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Pre-K: Quality matters

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Reprinted from [Ed NC](#): It's been an interesting month for prekindergarten. Three evaluations – one in Tennessee that received significant press attention, one in Utah that received much less coverage, and one in Georgia that received virtually no coverage outside of the state – highlight two important lessons:

When it comes to preschool, quality matters and successful programs need to be part of continuum.

Tennessee

An [evaluation](#) of Tennessee's public prekindergarten for four-year-olds made headlines across the country this month. Researchers published their findings from a randomized

control study that examined three questions:

- Does participation improve school readiness at kindergarten entry for economically disadvantaged children served?
- Are there differential effects for different subgroups of children?
- Are the effects of participation sustained through the kindergarten, first, second, and third grade years?

The answer to the first two questions was yes.

At the beginning of the school year, kindergarten teachers rated children that participated in the program as being better prepared for kindergarten work, having better behaviors related to learning in the classroom and having more positive peer relations than the control group.

And the effects were largest for children who were learning English and whose mothers had less than a high school degree.

The good news ended there. By the end of kindergarten, the children in the control group had caught up to the public pre-k children, and there were no longer significant differences between them on any achievement measures. It worsened by the end of first grade. First grade teachers rated the public pre-k children as less well prepared for school, having poorer work skills in the classrooms and feeling more negative about school. By second grade, the control group children outperformed the children who had attended public pre-k.

Quality is the likely culprit

The researchers questioned the quality of Tennessee's program. In an [interview](#) with Marketplace Radio, co-author Dale Farran said, "Quality is the likely culprit. And the issue may be that they're getting too much old-school academic time drilling letters and numbers, not too little. Researchers are finding 4-year-olds need instruction that looks a lot like playtime."

What happened during the early elementary grades

Less has been written about what happened in those kindergarten, first grade, and second grade years. Something was working. Children who attended Tennessee's public pre-k were starting school ahead of the control group.

Research from the [Chicago Longitudinal Study](#) provides evidence that what happens in the early elementary school grades impacts earlier gains made by children from economically disadvantaged families. In this randomized trial, children could participate in Chicago's Child-Parent Center program could receive up to six years of intervention, including preschool only, preschool and a kindergarten program, and preschool and an extended intervention that went through third grade.

Children who participated through third grade experienced the greatest benefits. This group

scored above the Chicago Public School average in reading achievement, and the cumulative rate of grade retention for the six-year group was below the national average.

While the Tennessee study dominated early learning news, two other evaluations showing strong results received much less attention.

Utah

The [Granite School District](#) had a big announcement this month, although it did not receive the same level of attention as the Tennessee report. Children that participated in the District's preschool program were significantly less likely to require special education in kindergarten.

Investors were counting on the program to produce such results. Goldman Sachs and the Pritzker Family Foundation paid to expand the preschool program to an additional 595 children. Called social impact bonds – or pay for success – Goldman will recoup its investment plus interest based on the number of children that do not need special education each year through sixth grade as a result of participating in the program.

The first year results have given investors reason to celebrate. Of the 595 new students, tests indicated that without preschool, 110 were likely to need special education. Only one did, saving the school district thousands of dollars in special education funding.

Goldman chose to invest in Granite School District's High Quality Preschool because it had a track record of success. Previous evaluations demonstrated that the program helped prepare children for kindergarten. Researchers found the program is closing the achievement gap in language arts and math for at-risk children, and the results persist past fifth grade.

Georgia

Since 2011, the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute has been [evaluating Georgia's pre-K](#) program for four-years-olds. The latest findings, released this month, showed program participation significantly improved children's school-readiness skills across a wide range of literacy, math, and general knowledge measures. Researchers found that students progressed faster while participating in the program compared to normal development in the same time frame.

The evaluation also examined the quality of children's experiences and found that classrooms were in the medium to high quality range. And teacher quality had the largest impact. The evaluators concluded that, "beliefs about teaching practices was the most consistent factor predicting differences in classroom quality. Teachers who scored higher on a measure of

developmentally appropriate beliefs about teaching practices had classrooms that were rated higher on measures of quality.

What about North Carolina?

North Carolina's early childhood programs – NC Pre-K and Smart Start – have been found to increase third grade reading and math scores and reduce special education placements. NC pre-K is North Carolina's full school day, public prekindergarten. Smart Start is a network of nonprofit local partnerships that serves as the state's early learning infrastructure to improve the quality of child care programs and implement evidence-based programs to increase the health, well-being, and development of children birth through age five. Together these programs impact children from birth through age five.

The combination of the programs [yielded the greatest results](#). Together, at 2009 funding levels, the two programs reduced the odds of special education placement by 39 percent.

What does it mean?

It comes as no surprise that the quality of a program matters. The Tennessee evaluation reinforces the importance of quality and Utah, Georgia, and North Carolina demonstrate the benefits that can be generated when quality is present.

But that's only part of the story.

Children develop on a continuum and the years between birth-through-eight represent a unique period on that continuum, when brain architecture is forming.

To build a strong foundation for learning and third grade reading, children need good health, strong families and high quality, developmentally appropriate early learning environments through third grade.

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